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William Faulkner

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Caroline Barr's Effect on the Novels of William Faulkner

In the novels of William Faulkner, some trends emerge regarding female characters. In many ways, it seems that he uses the same basic templates over and over, though with some important differences. The over-feminized goddess appears again and again, and many of the mothers have similar characteristics. The strongest female character tends to be the character of the black caretaker. She is usually the protector the family, and represents the truth and morality that many of the characters around her lack. Without her, the family would fall into chaos. She is the backbone, and perhaps most important character in holding everything together. Faulkner's own caretaker, Caroline Barr, was an inspiration for many of these characters. In many of Faulkner's novels, the black family caretaker plays a central role in the perpetuation and protection of the family that she cares for.

For example, the over-sexualized feminine ideal appears in many novels. Lena Grove in Light in August and Eula Varner in The Hamlet both take on this role. To the men in these novels, all three women are very similar. They all act as fertility goddesses, and elicit similar lustful responses from men. With the characterization given by the novels, however, we see that all three of these women are not the same. Eula is nothing

more than a lazy fool. As her mother says, she has no goal in life but to find a husband and start a family of her own. Everything will be handed to her, so she doesn't have to worry about school or a job.

Lena Grove has similar ambitions in life, but is much more active in going about them. In many ways, she is a model of determination, though her motives are suspect. She may be chasing after a fool in Lucas Burch, but that does not stop her from traveling great distances to find him. Both women are able to use their femininity in order to get men to do what they want, and sometimes, what they don't want. Looking through the eyes of Byron Bunch and Labove, they are practically the same woman. They fulfill a particular role for the men, and they each lust after them in their own unique way. The characters play similar roles in their respective novels even though it is clear that they are quite different.

The same can be said for the mothers in many of Faulkner's novels. Addie Bundren in As I Lay Dying and Caroline Compson in The Sound and the Fury are similar in many ways. They both have a chosen "favorite son" in their family that they care for above the others. They also each have somewhat an indifferent attitude towards their family and are in many ways resigned from life. Neither is described as being a very positive mother figure, no matter whose point of view you look at. For example, even the bond that exists between Addie and Jewel is tainted by a strange incestuous mother-son relationship.

So in many of Faulkner's novels, then, the mother figures that emerge are unexpected. In Light in August, Joanna Burden acts as a sort of mother figure to Joe Christmas. She is older than him, and attempts to act as a nurturing mentor for him. This

view is odd though, because it would imply that the relationship is incestuous. This sort of incestuous mother-son relationship is also seen in The Sound and the Fury. Not only is Caddy Compson an over-feminized sexual figure, but she also plays the role of a mother to her retarded brother Benjy. She was the only one who ever cared for him as a child, and because he has not passed the mental age of 3, she still fills his basic needs. He thinks of her as his mother in the most basic care giving ways. Unfortunately, due to her age and other factors, she is unable to perform this role. This leads to feelings of abandonment on the part of Benjy.

It would seem then, that most of the female characters in Faulkner's novels are weak. They play the feminine role. Even a somewhat strong character like Lena Grove still uses her sexuality to get men to do what she wants. This is not true of all female characters, however. Throughout the novels we see a few strong-willed (or maybe strong headed) women, most of which seem to be completely devoid of sexuality. These women are androgynous; blind to the sexual powers of other women and men alike. When Mrs. Armstid sees Lena Grove, she does not fall for her 'maiden in distress' act that so many men do. When she hears her story, she coldly says, "And you believe that he will... still be there when the sun sets?" (Light in August 21) Her ambivalence towards sexuality seems to suggest that she has a greater understanding of the truth: she completely understands the situation and is not swayed by anything but the facts. In this case, she is correct. This "strong woman" archetype also holds true for many of the female business owners in the stories. The reaction of Mrs. Beard to Lena Grove is very similar. Upon first seeing her, she looked at Lena, once completely, as strange women had been doing

for four weeks now.” Whether or not these reactions are territorial or out of jealousy, they still see the truth in the situation that the men seem unable to see.

The class of women that seems to tie together the best characteristics is the black caretaker. She represents the ideals of motherhood and truth, and is often the only character interested in maintaining a semblance of order in the household. To understand why these women are often such strong characters, it is important to look at Faulkner’s own life. From the time he was a young boy, Caroline Barr, or “Mammy Callie” had been the caretaker of the Faulkner children. She was a former slave who stayed in the family as a servant. She “cooked, she cleaned, and she cared for them.” (Williamson 153) The boys loved her stories of the wilderness and the “old days” of slavery. She did not act as a true disciplinarian to the boys, but she was still very important in raising them. As Faulkner himself described her:

“[She was] one of my earliest recollections, not only as a person, but as a fount of authority over my conduct and of security for my physical welfare and of active and constant affection and love. She was an active and constant precept for decent behavior. From her I learned to tell the truth, to refrain from waste, to be considerate of the weak and respectful to age. I saw fidelity to a family which was not hers, devotion and love for people she had not born.” (Cox 8)

Mammy Callie not only had this important moral effect on Faulkner, but may have also had an important artistic impact. She was able to give Faulkner his abilities for “tenderness and affection as well as entertainment.” (Minter 13) Faulkner was able to take advantage of this, and “years later repeated some of her stories about the lives and

habits of small animals, and so shared with others the wonder and delight she had shared with him. (13) Her presence aided in his abilities in a storyteller, and a great skill to share stories that he heard with others.

The effect of Mammy Callie, and her feelings on women can be seen throughout Faulkner's stories. She had the tendency to see women as "either mother/virgin figures, nurturing and passive, or as whores and bitches, with nothing on their minds but ruining a man's life" (Parini 20). This structuralist, binary view of women is evident throughout Faulkner's stories.

Mammy Callie's influence can be clearly seen in the character of Dilsey Gibson in The Sound and the Fury. Dilsey is the only character who seems to actually care about holding the Compson family together. In fact, she appears to be the only character who has decent goals in the novel, however futile they may be. Her efforts are hardly appreciated, though they are completely expected. When her hot water is not ready, Mrs. Compson yells for Dilsey at the top of the stairs for an hour. "I couldn't understand what was the matter," she says. "I've been lying awake for an hour at least, without hearing a sound from the kitchen." Dilsey is hardly affected by this extreme laziness, though. She tells her, "You put hit down and g'wan back to bed." She then goes on, preparing breakfast while taking care of Luster who has overslept. She is not only the glue holding the house together, but also the motor that keeps everything moving and not falling apart. This job is by no means easy, especially with the Compson's self-destructive attitudes.

Her relationship with the Compson children is also very important. When Damuddy dies, we get a glimpse of the daily trials that they put her through. "You all needs to go to bed," she tells them. (Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* 27). Raising the

Compson children is not an easy job by any means. She is quickly bombarded by their questions. “It is too early to go to bed now,” Caddy says. “What do we have to be so quiet for tonight?” “Quentin is not eating his supper, hasn’t he got to mind me?” “You’ve got to eat if I say you have.” The non-stop arguing from the children, not to mention Benjy’s crying would be enough to drive anyone mad. In fact, maybe this is a partial explanation for the attitude of Caroline Compson. Dilsey, however, is able to maintain her sanity and act as the only real caretaker for the children. She does not give up, and this persistence is prevalent through the entire novel. As she says, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (297). She did not give up on the family, and will stick with them until the very end.

Dilsey is a complex character, and her level of virtue is nearly unbelievable. It is often suggested that Mammy Callie is the main inspiration for her. “Faulkner drew Caroline barr’s portrait in fiction from many different angles, most vividly as Dilsey Gibso in The Sound and the Fury” (Parini 19). Faulkner wrote a dedication for Mammy Callie in his novel Get Down, Moses, and it is nearly impossible to read without thinking of Dilsey.

To Mammy Caroline Barr

Mississippi

[1840-1940]

Who was born in slavery and who

Gave to my family a fidelity without

stint or calculation or recompense

and to my childhood an immeasurable

devotion and love

This description could be written about Dilsey by one of the Compson children, if they had not been so selfish and self-absorbed. The inscription on the gravestone of Mammy Callie, placed by Faulkner, also has this effect: “Her white children bless her.”

Shades of Mammy Callie can also be seen in Light in August, though not to such extreme levels. The Hightower family had a slave named Cynthie, who even after freed, refused to leave. This is reminiscent of Mammy Callie. She also had a lasting impact on a young Gail Hightower. Even though she was long since passed, she still existed in his mind as “one of the three phantoms” that haunt him, along with his father and his mother. What she ultimately represents to him is the truth.

Gail Hightower has lived a life of fantasy. Since the time he was a young man, he has been obsessed with the thoughts of his grandfather, a “great Civil War General,” charging down the street and dying in this heroic gesture. Near the end of the novel, as he lays in his house, nearly dead, he suddenly remembers Cinthy, his family servant. She was the one who held the truth that he had been avoiding his whole life. She had told him the facts that he now repressed and tried to ignore. “Stealin chickens. A man growed, wid a married son, gone to war whar his business was killing Yankees, killed in somebody else’s henhouse wid a han’full of feathers” (Faulkner *Light in August* 485). So the truth was that his grandfather was not a war hero, but rather had just died in the middle of an embarrassing and cowardly act.

Like Dilsey, Cinthy represents a greater truth. She is practical and serious about things. The black caretaker often takes this role in Faulkner’s stories. As Gail Hightower

says, “This is what Cinthy told me. And I believe. I know. It’s too fine to doubt. It’s too fine, too simple, ever to have been invented by white thinking” (484). The use of the black character to fill this role, in the South, during this time period, seems almost ironic. For the wisest of all the characters, Faulkner chose the class that is supposed to be “untouchable.” They are in many ways better than their supposedly superior white counterparts. Dilsey is a much better mother than Caroline Compson, and Cinthy represents truth whereas other characters are just bad memories. They each represent a moral goodness that is rarely seen in the rest of their stories.

Clytie, in Absalom, Absalom!, has a few of these characteristics, but is a very different type of caretaker. As Thomas Sutpen’s illegitimate daughter, she is an actual member of the family that she protects. She is never considered to be a slave, but is not treated with the same amount of respect that they would treat someone who was white. When Rosa Coldfield comes to Sutpen’s Hundred she is shocked by Clytie’s forward behavior. “‘Rosa?’” she cries “‘To me? To my face?’ Then she touched me, an then I did stop dead.” (Faulkner Absalom, Absalom! 139) It does not matter who she is – she is still black, and that is all that matters. Clytie takes on the role of caretaker to Henry Sutpen when he is found after the murder of Charles Bon. She also travels to New Orleans to retrieve Charles Bon’s son, and acts as his caretaker. Her efforts are similar to Dilsey, though they may be futile. She is trying to keep the blood-line alive, but seems to really be the only one interested in doing it.

Her goals also seem to be rather ironic. As the half-black, nearly ignored member of the family, it would seem that she would be the least interested in keeping the family together. She is more concerned than anyone, however. She is again the strength, like

Dilsey. They are both selfless and represent goodness rarely seen in the characters of these novels.

The female characters in Faulkner's novels can usually be easily put into two groups. There are weak, feminized characters, and there are strong, somewhat androgynous characters. The black caretaker does not fit easily into either of these groups. She is not given much in the way of sexual identity, but she is still loving and motherly to the family that she protects, like Mammy Callie was for William Faulkner. She represents the moral center and is the true protector of the family. Without her, the families would be in even more chaos than they already are. For this reason, she is perhaps the most important character in the novels.

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